

How Paper Tigers Kill

The expression “America is just a paper tiger” has remained a common platitude in China ever since its first invocation in Mao Zedong thought. Historian-activist Judith Balso has noted: “Like many other statements of Mao Zedong, the description of imperialists—or even all reactionaries—as ‘paper tigers’ (*zhi laohu*) became famous beyond China through [Lin Biao’s compilation of] the *Little Red Book*, where paper tigers feature in the title of its sixth chapter” (2019, 161). Here, Balso crucially draws attention to the ways in which the paper tiger—as an ideological metaphor—stands in a dialogical relationship with metaphors like “lifting a rock only to drop it on one’s own feet,” “nooses round the neck of US imperialism,” and “the East Wind is prevailing over the West Wind,” which are juxtaposed throughout the text. Of this juxtaposition, Balso further notes: “the paper tiger, far from being a *trompe l’oeil* in which the fragility of the enemy would be masked by a belief in its appearance of ferocity, reveals the double nature of any class enemy” (2019, 161). Mao Zedong himself was dialectically reflexive about this double nature:

Here I should like to answer the question of whether imperialism and all reactionaries are real tigers. The answer is that they are at once real tigers and paper tigers, they are in the process of being changed from real into paper tigers. Change means transformation. Real tigers are transformed into paper tigers, into their opposite. This is true of all things, and not just social phenomena. But why take full account of [the enemy] if he is not a real tiger? . . . Just as there is not a single thing in the world without a dual nature (this is the law of the unity of opposites), so imperialism and all reactionaries have a dual nature—they are at the same time real tigers and paper tigers.¹

Additionally, we can understand paper tigers, in their popular metaphorical uptake, as ultimately human-made media artifacts that do not represent the same danger as their real others existing within the realm of a primal, chthonic nature. In recent times, however, nature has also emerged as a countertrope to China’s postsocialist rush toward the terraformation of an alienating, nature-destroying Anthropocenic modernity—where nature is invoked as a utopic, more Apollonian space-time of

harmonious existence between human and nonhuman worlds (Paglia 1990). Nature—in this Eurocentric and dualist (but nonetheless persistent) folk ideology—imbricates a tension between utopic and dystopic potentials. This chapter discusses the mass and socially mediated recruitment of nature as metaphor and translational technology in Afro-Chinese encounters. In doing so, I propose an account of dangerous mediation and translational attunement in Afro-Chinese encounters.

MASS-MEDIATED TIGERS

On July 23, 2016, at Badaling Wildlife World, near the Great Wall in suburban Beijing's Yanqing district, a family of three became victims of a tiger attack. The event received wide coverage in both the Chinese and international media. Following the release of a short clip of surveillance video footage broadcast by mainland media, the *South China Morning Post* provided the following account to an English audience two days after the attack:

[The video] shows a woman exiting the front passenger door of a white sedan and walking to the driver's door, where she stands talking to the driver, later confirmed to be her husband. A tiger appears from behind her and drags her off. The driver gives chase and all three disappear off camera, before he returns to the car where he is joined by another woman from the back seat, and they run in the direction the tiger dragged the first woman. The second woman was confirmed by relatives to be the 57-year-old mother of the woman who was dragged away.²

All subsequent news reports of the event in the week following the attack based their accounts on the Yanqing district government press statement, which noted that the mother was tragically killed by the tiger, and that the daughter was raced to a hospital where she had to undergo surgery. A government spokesperson for the district also indicated that the woman had ignored danger warnings from nearby personnel before the attack, and emphasized that the wildlife park had multiple signs telling tourists to stay in their cars, with warnings being repeatedly broadcast via loudspeakers. The event sparked major debates among Chinese netizens, followed by reams of meta-commentary by journalists following the case as a human-interest story. Debates among Chinese netizens, mirrored in journalistic analyses and investigations, appeared to follow two major themes: victim accountability and modernity critique.

In the first scenario, netizens debated whether the daughter was to blame for leaving the vehicle, or whether the husband caused her to leave the car, and whether the victim should receive compensation. One Sina poll of over 310,000 netizens indicated that only 2.3 percent of respondents thought that the zoo should be punished for the attack.

On Chinese social media platforms like Weibo, commentators made statements like: "The zoo should be asking the family for compensation, they should be compensated for their losses after being forced to temporarily shut down," or "Refund

her the ticket fee and nothing more.” The second theme of critique, however, emerged more tacitly: that despite the provision of an array of signs that danger was present, the victims were somehow oblivious to, or ignorant of, the immediacy of a tiger threat. This tacit media discourse suggested that there was an emerging panic around the possibilities of semiotic failure, which were revealed in the subsequent legal case around reparations, as well as the institutional responses that followed.

These institutional and legal responses focused on the presence of “clear” signs of danger on the one hand, but also emphasized the need for more innovative signs of danger for future visiting tourists on the other. Thus, a contradiction emerged: the media infrastructure of danger was revealed to be paradoxically both adequate and in need of an upgrade due to its presupposed inadequacy. Here, however, an important question emerges: Could the mediation of danger itself have been the very obstacle to experiencing the immediacy of a tiger threat in the first place? One report discussing the victim-blaming that followed the attack insisted on a common saying: “People’s words are perhaps more scary than the mouth of a tiger.” In the case of warning signs that demarcate the semiotic infrastructure of danger, could it be that perhaps the translations of metallic, digital, and paper tigers are out of synch with the unpredictable, and thus dangerous, alterity represented by the tiger itself?

These questions mirror an older but persistent media and semiotic anthropological tension—between the interplay of alterity and its translation, where translation has been understood as a general trope of mediation for generations of media theorists. This contrasts with its “purely” language-metaphorical interpretation and implementations in mainstream anthropology (Geertz 1977; Asad 1986). To be sure, this translational concern with alterity has also been demonstrated, with perhaps more explicit, broader anti-colonial stakes in the equally ethnographic work of many literary and postcolonial theorists (Spivak 1993; Bhabha 1994; Sakai 1997). In alignment with critical media and postcolonial concerns, many linguistic anthropologists and semioticians have pointed out that eliding the particularities of language, media, and alterity as a densely imbricated and convergent social-semiotic interface risks occluding its existence as a total set of historical material conditions as well as the sign relations that operate and are given resonance within them (M. Silverstein 1976; Gal 2015; Nakassis 2016b). From such a perspective, language—as a media infrastructure in itself—dialectically precedes and is maintained through *langue*, *parole*, and an array of communicative and embodied practices and phenomena. Here, it is precisely the dialogical nature of these maintenance processes that many ethnographers might often inadvertently misconstrue as “non-linguistic” or “unmediated”—where communication nests itself in the “differences that make a difference” within a total semiotic domain, as Gregory Bateson once suggested (1972).

Beyond the obvious point that many analysts who are critical of translation as analytic must themselves ultimately commit to a highly mediated set of methods and technologies in order to write about media objects, sites, and informants—including the language—it is clear that the pragmatic indispensability of translation

in undertaking research, writing, and analysis becomes nonetheless inevitable. This is because the interpersonal encounters that co(n)textualize media objects and their mediation invariably must presume upon epistemologies of universalism as “structures of aspiration” (Li 2021, 234). For those engaged in the endeavor of translation—like Chinese netizens mediating social hierarchies through media meta-commentary around a tiger attack—the achievement of a translation exists as an unquestionable horizon of possibility, even while its contours seem to ever-recede from one’s semantic grasp.

Tigers and their associated natures have led a vibrant life through metaphor in China. Though continually framed as representing a mysterious alterity—a hidden, merciless threat—tigers are nonetheless tirelessly recruited to folktales, analogies, and tropes of compassion, fidelity, and power throughout the Chinese and broader Asian literary context. Similarly, Chinese language and civilization has led a vibrant life through metaphor in the Orientalist west, despite being reduced to a frequently racist “inscrutability” or Herderian “providential” foil for Aryan-Semitic linguistic chauvinisms (Olender 2009). Inscrutability and alterity, thus, represent no obstacles to our capacities for reflexivity about subjects designated as such, nor the ability of so-designated inscrutable or alter subjects to inhabit the intelligible, ethical, and politically recruitable forms of personhood they have been recruited to. Furthermore, metaphors and the reflexive, intersubjective processes through which they are generated are in fact mediating processes in the broader Hegelian sense—in that they have concrete, material effects: they constitute both the reflexive actors and their referring subjects as entities that are vulnerable to laws, infrastructures, and violence.

Thus, my framing of translation encompasses this broader process of mediation in the metaphorical-materialist sense. In clarifying, however, I am compelled to distinguish my position from a prominent set of translational genealogies in post- or nonhuman ethnography and criticism.

GRIDS, EXPLOITS, AND NETWORKS

Arguing for an approach that obviates or at least problematizes the role of translation in nonhuman interactions, a growing genealogy of posthuman anthropology and media theory posits subjects and objects of analysis that imbricate realms of human, animal, natural, and technological emergence. An array of metaphors to describe such subjects and objects abound: cyborg, milieu, actant, grid, network, and parasite are prominent examples:

Cyborg (Haraway 1991; Helmreich 2007)

Milieu (Foucault 2007; Galloway and Thacker 2007; Mackenzie 2010)

Actant, Grid, Network (Latour 1983, 2005)

Parasite (Serres 1982; Derrida 1988)

As I clumsily tried to read these characters with my still limited Chinese, John pulled out his iPhone and activated the well-known app Pleco. He used the recognition software to instantly translate the relevant characters. Like QR code readers, Pleco accesses a smartphone's camera, recognizing and instantly translating Chinese characters, allowing the user to visually capture and store the translated item in a flashcard for later review. In this way, the entire city of Beijing can be converted into a digital archive for language review later.

The process of incrementally compiling this digital archive allowed us to read the names of all the bus stops we had come to know aurally within our first few months in the city. However, at that time, we were not yet able to recognize them visually. We quickly scanned all the bus stop names into Pleco so we would know which direction to catch the bus from, as well as at which stop to get off at once we had caught the right bus. We were relieved to be standing at the right stop and were fortunate to catch one of the 355 buses as it was arriving. It was getting dark and we were late for a dinner appointment with some other African and Chinese friends, having just returned from a sports meeting at a different university an hour before. Along with a massive, impatient crowd, we pushed on board as the rain began to pour and remained squashed-up against the window as we watched rush-hour traffic visibly escalate on the other side of the bus's window. As digging elbows pushed us right up against the breath-fogged window, John turned to me saying, "Wow, that girl driving the Mercedes-Benz out there is really cute. I'm going to get her number." I thought he was joking until he once again pulled out his iPhone, this time opening WeChat, and started searching the application's local network function for connections that might have the woman's photo. When she accepted his request, John, grinning sheepishly, showed me his phone. Her name was Mingming. The conversation that followed was mediated by a combination of her broken English, his Pleco-assisted Chinese, and WeChat's English translation function that came in handy when Mingming texted in Chinese characters that were beyond our (at the time) somewhat rudimentary language abilities. Eventually, she wanted to know where he was chatting with her from, so she could see her interlocutor, since he did not have a WeChat profile picture of himself, opting instead for a cartoon character as his icon—Doraemon, the time-traveling and earless cyber cat.

As we pulled even with her car, he waved frantically to her from the bus window, trying to get her attention. She turned and must have been curious about the visibly keen black man waving at her, and gingerly waved back. He showed her his WeChat screen on his iPhone and she nodded. What appeared to be initial mutual interest quickly petered out after this, and her car disappeared behind several lanes of traffic ahead of the bus. John tried to contact her on many occasions afterward, but never heard back from Mingming again.

In one popular media narrative, John emerges as a subject whose legibility, history, and ideological landscape becomes nondifferentiable from the emergent

potentials of his technological assemblage. He appears to emerge as simultaneous actor-actant in Bruno Latour's nomenclature:

[T]he actor-network theory (hence A[N]T) has very little to do with the study of social networks. These studies no matter how interesting concerns themselves with the social relations of individual human actors—their frequency, distribution, homogeneity, proximity. It was devised as a reaction to the often too global concepts like those of institutions, organizations, states and nations, adding to them more realistic and smaller set of associations. Although A[N]T shares this distrust for such vague all encompassing sociological terms it aims at describing also the very nature of societies. But to do so it does not limit itself to human individual actors but extend the word *actor*—or *actant*—to non-human, non individual entities. Whereas social network adds information on the relations of humans in a social and natural world which is left untouched by the analysis, A[N]T aims at accounting for the very essence of societies and natures. It does not wish to add social networks to social theory but to rebuild social theory out of networks. It is as much an ontology or a metaphysics, as a sociology. (1996, 369–70)

Analytically, actor-actant formulations present a problem: though they are posthuman analytics, they apparently need to be understood against the backdrop of the negated individual human subject—as the paradoxically presumed-upon primary social unit. Latourian and many postmodern media theorists often present their critique of “rational actor” biases, as though no theorist in the humanistic social sciences has ever considered moving beyond individual-centrism. Even Eurocentric thinkers like Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber—all of whom have considerably influenced generations of social inquisitors in the global social sciences—would likely balk at Latour's claim to innovation in this regard, particularly given that all three thinkers and their intellectual genealogies have in fact contested the “individual human actor” as the primary unit of analysis for many decades prior to ANT.

Here, a perhaps impertinent question emerges: if John and Mingming are equal actor-actants in relation to their phones and the surrounding traffic assemblage, could we even see—let alone account for—racism and racial ideology as supplying ideological gravity to Latour's account of their colliding on his network? Are there hills and valleys in his grid, and if so what forces allow them to both be felt as well as to stratify actants?

Perhaps actors like John and Mingming would cherish a fluidity of existence where epistemology has no bearing on their passage through the world, but such an experience of fluid subjectivity is reserved for an unmarked few. Being “just an actor-actant” might appear like wondrous oblivion to the marked subject in a marked body. In this sense, ANT emerges as a view of the social that ultimately stratifies those reaching for it—in this case, the materialized epistemology of John's racialization emerges despite the proposition of its “objectively relative” ontology on a posthuman network. It is in this way that sensual, intersubjective phenomenologies problematize even the most logical metaphysics.

In a second prominent media narrative, John—like a twenty-first-century cyber-guerilla—can be seen contesting the cabalistic forces of governmentality and neoliberalism by appropriating the intrinsically democratic, mass-mediated weapons of emancipatory self-fashioning. This trope emerges particularly strongly in Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker’s *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*. Masquerading as a kind of intellectual anarchism, Thacker and Galloway ultimately enshrine the privilege of making an argument that can, in their words: “avoid the limits of academic writing in favor of a more experimental, speculative approach” (2007, vii). Not unlike Latour, Galloway and Thacker regard the network itself as an arbitrary commensurator despite the asymmetrical human labor that goes into its construction:

The nonhuman quality of networks is precisely what makes them so difficult to grasp. They are, we suggest, a medium of contemporary power, and yet no single subject or group absolutely controls a network. Human subjects constitute and construct networks, but always in a highly distributed and unequal fashion. Human subjects thrive on network interaction (kin groups, clans, the social), yet the moments when the network logic takes over—in the mob or the swarm, in contagion or infection—are the moments that are the most disorienting, the most threatening to the integrity of the human ego. (2007, 5)

In this quote, there is a troubling slippage from the exploitative asymmetries of human labor to the exploitable symmetry of an unruly nonhuman network. The signs, “nonhumanity” and “disorientation” do considerable work here to convert the network into something impersonal and out-of-control, thus equivocating an egalitarian exploit. This shames the vulgar humanist or materialist: “One must be an egoistic, anthropocentric narcissist to suggest that networks could be in any way interested or contingent infrastructures.” The exploit rhetorically posits: “Now that the intractable network is beyond hegemony, don’t we all have equal access?”

In both Latour’s and Thacker and Galloway’s narratives, translation—as an ambiguously nonagential, yet uncannily vitalist metaphor—emerges as either inherently arbitrary or inherently egalitarian. In their schema, John’s techno-social ensemble in the previous interaction either explicates a flat, synchronic grid—agentless symmetrical translation without mediation, or, paradoxically, a super-agential appropriation of an equal opportunity techno-linguistic media assemblage—the hijacking of the means of translation as a radically democratic *exploit*.

However, both of these prominent media narratives elide three important receptional dimensions of translation: (1) “languages” or units of commensuration; (2) ideological space-time or gravity; and (3) sensory-semiotic capacities that make such a translation intelligible. These three dimensions can be understood as register/genre; context or co-text; and conditions of reception (see fig. 3).

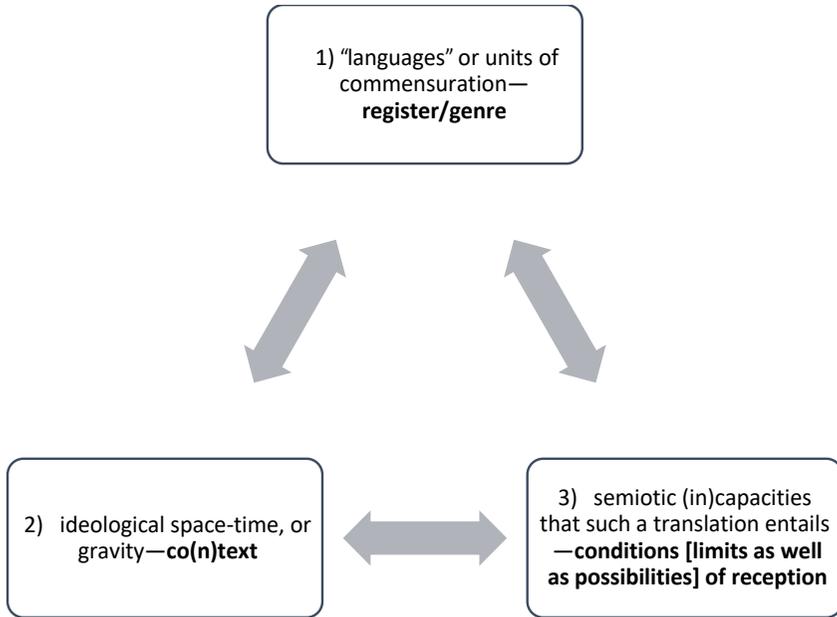


FIGURE 3. Three receptional dimensions of translation.

Together, they extend from what linguistic anthropologists of media have discussed as indexicality (Nakassis 2018; Chumley 2016). However, in articulating some of the more apparent critical theoretical stakes of this analytical approach, I have found the work of Frankfurt School media historian Susan Buck-Morss particularly productive. Buck-Morss points to “numbing” or anesthesia as historically situated, techno-social strategies to diminish shock as a response to industrial modernity. In doing so, she argues for an etymological resuturing of the discourses of aesthetics and anesthetics. Here, she points to a broader contextualization of aesthetics as imbricating a kind of calibration of the sensorium. As she suggests: “the experience of intoxication is not limited to drug-induced, biochemical transformations,” in fact, “narcotics” can be “made out of reality itself” (1992, 22). In the meta-debates around the mediation of danger in Beijing’s Tiger Park, and in John’s recourse to WeChat and the avatar Doraemon in sustaining his interaction with Mingming, we see an analog to Buck-Morss’s argument. Western industrial modernity’s sensory numbing of twentieth-century urban inhabitants finds its counterpoint in the animal-cyborg ensembles of twenty-first-century mediation—a process that does not unfold outside of an ideological landscape that still stratifies along intersectional lines. Like Buck-Morss’s (an)aesthetic dependencies, Chinese netizens and African media users invest in semiotic infrastructures of danger-avoidance and self-curation. In doing so, they

recruit variously mediated “natures”—paper tigers, real tigers, and cyber cats alike. Such techno-sensory investments facilitate an analogous protective shielding from the disappointments of cosmopolitan modernity. What, however, does this shielding conceal through its numbing effects? If nature as material metaphor in contemporary China is indeed recruited for anesthesia, what kinds of traumas are being elided and displaced?

FROM NATURAL SEMANTICS TO RACIALIZED PRAGMATICS

In 2013 I began conducting preliminary fieldwork on the racialized interactions between African students and their Chinese interlocutors in Beijing. At this time, one informant—an elite Chinese journalist named Yiwen—offhandedly remarked that she liked Africans “because they are just like animals,” mirroring my interaction with Lili in chapter 3. As with Lili, I adopted the default position that this was a racist thing to say. She, like other Chinese informants who had said similar things, balked at my reading and said: “You misunderstand. I think it’s wonderful that they [Africans] are so close to nature. We Chinese are nothing, we just eat the world’s resources.” To be sure, the idea that there exists a kind of originary, authentic subject of nature that contrasts with a compromised Chinese modernity is a fairly pervasive sentiment in urban China.

Understanding how this subjectivity becomes mapped onto black bodies, however, requires an approach that accounts for the ways in which nature is not only recruited but also racialized as a means of mediating that modernity.

Mingming’s negation of John could be an open-ended, nonselective act—like the obvious frequency with which black African students are more frequently ignored by Chinese cab drivers compared to their foreign counterparts. Yiwen’s nature-black African equivalencies may well emerge from a place of innocent concatenations of categories of alterity, which can be miscontextualized by Anglophone intellectual observers. The issue, however, isn’t whether Mingming and Yiwen *are* racist in the semantically flat-footed Euro-American sense. Rather, what is at issue must account for what is pragmatically *experienced*: (a) whether John and others like him face persistent racialized discrimination in China; and (b) how to account for the ideological manifestation of racism in a context that denies that racism is possible because of a hyper-localist analytical exoticism. The question of whether Chinese subjects are racist, as suggested in the previous chapter, problematically assumes that the translation of the meanings of actions are determined by “sign production” and their always elusory intentions. This preoccupation both occludes reception as a vast domain of semiosis and denies the possibility that meanings of signs are transformed through the interaction of persons coming from different participant frameworks.

John and others are not being profiled because they are “dark” or because somehow there is a folk-schema of segmentable “blackness” in China. Black African students are profiled because they are racio-politically black in a more transnational sense, for Chinese cosmopolitan interlocutors are judging them according to imagined international, unmarked horizons of aspirational personhood—with English-language characteristics. Far from being “local,” various black subjects have undeniably become a part of the always-shifting, yet always-stratified schema of Chinese urban, class, and racial capital. The question is not whether one *is* black in some essential semantic framework, but rather—in a more pragmatic sense—*for whom* one is black, and *in what ways* this category of racial capital becomes configured through other intersectional vectors of social stratification in an encounter that includes subjects who are not in fact Chinese, but who are undeniably in China and helping to expand a Sinophone world.

To ask “Where is blackness in China?” is as absurd an intellectual question as asking where Europeans’ “yellowness” philologically stems from in their perception of East Asian alterities. Furthermore, we are not undertaking study into the visual cognition of racism, but rather the pragmatic and perceptible features of politicized blackness and black experience. It is as inappropriate for a Sinologist to dismiss racism, racialization, and racial capital in China as it is for a scholar of English literature with no experience with the Chinese language to posit calligraphic divinations of the potential meanings of Chinese characters and how they might determine cultural features of Chinese-language speakers. Sinologists are no more equipped to study transnational racial capital than a nonlinguist is to evaluate language features of a language they have no personal or disciplinary experiences with, making use only of their own mother-tongue bias. Perhaps Sinological perspectives, in their current form, are not all that well equipped to undertake the increasingly urgent inquiries into making and translating of China’s others?

It is understandable that this is an uncomfortable proposition in an analytical tradition like western Sinology, which has focused on segmentation, differentiation, and exegetic nuance in building an impressive archive around the proposition of quintessence and civilizational integrity, while simultaneously being compelled to enact a conceptual monopoly on every interaction the Sinosphere touches. This compels a number of career Sinologists, at present, to saunter into debates on the racialization of blackness in China, without bothering to engage the substantial archive on transnational black experience and with no awareness that this is significantly different from: (a) the national histories of citizens of different African countries; (b) the ethnic identities within and across them; and (c) the textual semantics of *hei* in the exegesis of Chinese classical texts. Rather, it may be prudent to ask how the historical fact of global-colonial racial capital inflects Sinology’s institutional orientations around durability and agreement on the names of things. I am in fact willing to bet my life that such a change in orientation—approaching

Sinology from politically black genealogies of the Global South—will reveal significant disciplinary blind spots.

Two prominent blind spots that are important to this discussion include Occidentalism and semantic relativism; in many ways, the former can be understood as leading into the latter.³ The unfortunate effect of standardized western languages as the target context for Sinophone and Sinosphere matrixes is that a monolingualistic “dictionary” bias enters the frame when discussing and ultimately essentializing the *names* of the ten thousand things *as* the ten thousand things in themselves. Many Herderian-influenced western Sinologists essentialized this “frozen-in-time” quality as an intrinsic feature of Chinese (Olender 2009). It is apparent, however, that this perception of language was problematically disconnected from Chinese speakers’ diverse practices through time down to the present, and stemmed more from western Sinologists’ own Lockean biases around what languages are or how languages should work. Though the surface racist forms of this bias have been scraped away, their foundational element persists in semantic relativism. Let’s consider two frequently motivated equivalencies: *hei* as the limited semantic range of both “blackness” (of color) and “darkness” (of skin) in China; and *ziran* and *shanshui* as expressions of a semantic “nature” dualism in the Sinosphere.

Here, *shanshui* might be understood as a poetic expression of ethical nature-feeling or “landscape” in classical Chinese art and writing, while *ziran* represents more of a Linnaean biological segmentation of the (scientifically) natural world—a kind of nature without classical poetry. I have encountered the leveraging of these equivalencies mostly when presenting early versions of these chapters to China studies scholars. In such settings, mostly western-trained or Chinese cosmopolitan Sinologists frequently attempted to correct my third-world misconception of what “blackness” and “nature” meant in China by seeking recourse to Han Chinese hyper-localism as a means of erasing black experience in the area sphere of their object of study. The problem with semantic relativism around limited distillation of terms like *shanshui*, *ziran*, and *hei* (among practitioners of what should be an exegetic tradition) is that the game of defining singular words posits a conceptual Shangri-la, where “Chinese” concepts are hermetically sealed from the world—a recapitulation of Herderianism.

Beyond this political problem of Orientalism in the motivation of *shanshui*’s and *ziran*’s seemingly apolitical semantic range, a foundational semiotic as well as conceptual problem emerges around the fetishization of graphic = semantic continuities in reading the character for *hei* (see fig. 4). The understanding of words like *hei* having a singular apolitical association with some kind of ambiguous “black-dark” gradable and arbitrary color scheme presents not only a misleading one-to-one relation between *hei* as character and *hei* as univocal semantic unit across contexts referring to color, skin tone, and political blackness. It also elides the fact that Chinese subjects of variously stratified class and educational backgrounds can in fact distinguish the lexical differences of *hei*—which are neither frozen in time,

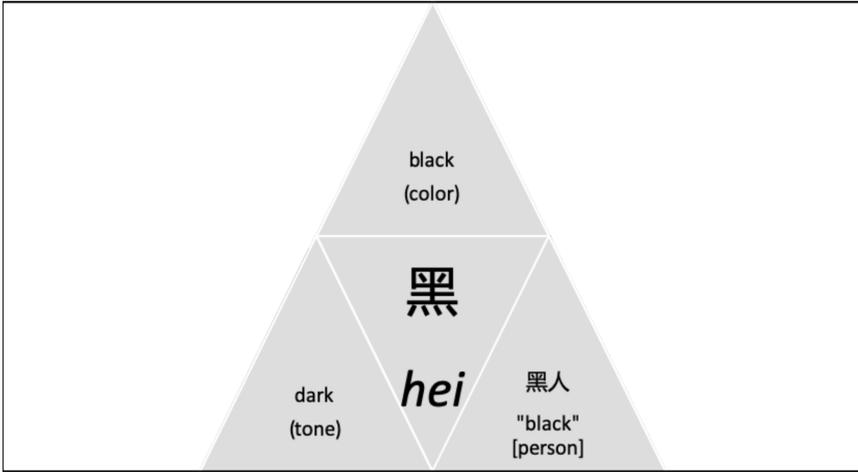


FIGURE 4. Semantically relative associations of *hei*.

nor inter-linguistically isolated—in the same ways English speakers can distinguish the homophones *dark* (as a transcendental state) and *dark* (as a gradable quality). Consider the following sentences:

- A) Lili's mother: "Lili's husband became rather dark after their honeymoon."
- B) Lili's mother: "Lili's husband is a little dark."

Sentence A suggests that Lili's husband became tanned, and that there is a concern for the degree to which he has been tanned, as tanning can be graded into the limited categorial distinctions of English from dark, to darker, to darkest. In the racial ideologies of many liberal intellectual theaters, race and racialization are interpretable only in these categorial distinctions, which deny categorial racialization as political and equally pragmatic realities. Sentence B, though it might seem to suggest a categorial gradeability in the sense of "a little," in fact presumes upon a categorial thus transcendental darkness even in its Chinese gloss: *yi dian (dian)*. With reference to the previous chapter, Tim's "darkness A" can be changed by degrees, while Adam's "darkness B" cannot. Racism and various kinds of essentialism geared toward social stratification frequently nest categorial ideologies of distinction within a categorial language of potential disavowal. Saying "your husband is a little dark," as in the second sense, implies a categorially nongradable blackness through the absurd and thus deniable equivocation of darkness's categorial gradeability (see Kockelman 2016).

Furthermore, such sematic-relativist fixations occlude what linguist Benjamin Whorf (1956) might describe as the *cryptotypic* articulations that exist within languages or inter-linguistically among members of a speaking community that operate through more than one language. The proposition that racist articulations between

blackness and nature don't exist in Chinese in the way they do in English—and that therefore articulations of blackness and nature are meaningless—shares the same conceptual problem as suggesting English lends itself inherently to generational and gender equality because it lacks honorific structures and gendered nouns. As Whorf demonstrated, English shares many covert categories of all kinds of hierarchical structures that were otherwise embedded in the actual grammatical forms of other languages. He referred to these covert categories as cryptotypes. In a similar way, it would be useful to point out that the articulation of nature and blackness in China needn't operate through the semantic ranges of *hei*, *shanshui*, and *ziran*. In fact, they can even do so in English. Consider the following extract in Michael Sullivan's discussion of an infamous letter to African embassies in Beijing, sent on behalf of the Chinese Students Association (CSA) in 1989. It is an example that demonstrates this cryptotypic articulation handily:

China whose thousand-year glory and cultural tradition is ineffaceably written in the history of mankind, stands today, because of the great Xiao-Ping's merit in front of a new historical prime. . . . We are walking towards our great aim on a broad road opened to [the] advanced and civilized world. It doesn't mean, however, that we will feed the whole uncultured Africa with the results of our efforts and we will allow any Negro to hang about our universities to annoy Chinese girls and to introduce on our academic grounds manner[s] acquired by life in tropical forests, offending our traditional hospitality and broad mindedness. If . . . there will be no correction in [the] behaviour of idling black students, new and even harder lessons of "friendship" will follow. They [i.e., these lessons] will be based on the experience of Americans, who know very well what to do to curb the Negroes in their country.⁴

If one were reading this extract through the myopic lens of word-production, one might infer that no political meaning resides in phrases like "black students" or "life in tropical forests"—that these are disinterested observations of the skin tones and climactic terroir of the students being described. The reader will hopefully agree that this would not only be an idiotic reading, but also a completely bad faith interpretation that is likely informed by a perspective so mired in racism that it mistakes outright discrimination for an innocent politics of unmarkedness.⁵ Again, beyond the obvious political problems of semantic relativism, this letter and countless Sino-African communications like it over the preceding decades should draw our concern not to the semantics of word-production, but rather the more pragmatic dimensions of reception and translation. The writers of the letter wrote the letter in English with the intention that it was meant to be read in English by African diplomats. The letter further recruited a US-specific but transnationally mediated chronotope of race relations, referring to black students as Negroes. This may prompt the conspiracy theorist to infer a CIA plot in the circulation of the letter. However, I have witnessed too many racialized interactions between Chinese and African students that recruit the same contextually peculiar but

transnationally intelligible combinations of Anglo racist tropes (even into Chinese) to attribute the content of the letter to US imperialist sabotage—even though such expressions of imperialism are very real in many other contexts. Thus, conjoined interpretations of Anglo-racial blackness and nature as somehow foreign concepts to cosmopolitan Chinese subjects who are cognitively sequestered in their own linguistic prisons of *hei*, *shanshui*, and *ziran* seems like a fairly obvious recapitulation of the Anglo-colonial mentales of inscrutability.

A more explicit iteration of this articulation between blackness and nature emerged during an art exhibition in Chengdu, where the exotic imaginary that black Africans index an originary state of nature was literally put on display through a series of photographic juxtapositions by acclaimed Chinese photographer Yu Huiping. His photographic series—titled *This is Africa*—placed African photographic subjects next to those of animal subjects. In defense of artistic expression, and against initial protests directed toward the exhibition, the juxtapositions were praised by Zhao Yixin—president of the China Photographic Publishing House—as “perceptive, smart and visually impactful, capturing the vitality of primitive life.” Wang Yuejun, a curator of the museum, also came to Yu’s defense, stating that “in Chinese proverbs, animals are always used for admiration and compliment.”

Nature again operates as anesthetic against a diffuse but compromised modernity. In the exhibit of *This is Africa*, this framing is perhaps taken a step further. We may understand anti-modernist strategies of synesthesia as necessitating the recruitment of a racialized “blackness of nature.” Is this a counterpoint to an unmarked “nature of whiteness” at the core of Chinese and African subjects’ emerging cosmopolitan horizon of aspiration? Adding weight to this proposition, it is worth pointing out that blackness-equals-nature equivocations only stand while African subjects in China are not taken as speaking, communicating, urban subjects, that are already extractively incorporated in China’s social media matrix. Their participation in this domain bears crucial insights for a critique of posthumanism from the perspective of Afro-Chinese interactions. If Chinese subjects are (syn)aesthetically articulating new discourses of nature and race as a response to an acceleratively anomic modernity; how might we understand African students’ (syn)aesthetic approaches to the similarly alienating conditions of educational labor migrancy? Engaging this question, I observed a resonance between the intersectionally compromised dependencies on the Angloscene as demonstrated by Lerato and Damien in chapter 1, and a dimension of social life that some anthropologists have discussed broadly as affect. In situating affect in a discussions of raciolinguistic encounter, I must qualify that I align more with a historical-materialist framing of affect (Berlant 2011; Mazzarella 2017) than a vitalist and post-representational one (Stewart 2007; Massumi 2015). However, my fundamental inspiration in situating affect in Afro-Chinese encounters takes its cue from Frantz Fanon’s own permutations in *Wretched of the Earth*.

AFFECTIVITIES OF THE AFRO-CHINESE ANGLOSCENE

In John's smartphone vignette recounted earlier in this chapter, we see a further analog to Buck-Morss's argument. Western industrial modernity's sensory numbing of twentieth-century urban inhabitants also finds its counterpoint in John's and others' commitment to the techno-linguistic ensembles of twenty-first-century social media within the ideological landscape of white, English, cosmopolitan cultural capital. Like Buck-Morss's (an)aesthetic dependencies, John's and others' techno-linguistic investment facilitates an analogous protective shielding from the disappointments of cosmopolitan mobility, while simultaneously committing them to its very means of dissemination—an English-iPhone-mobility ensemble.

Many students like John arrive in Beijing after grueling personal and academic trials only to find many of their Chinese peers aspiring to enter American and European universities. At present, there is a massive and expanding education industry in centers like Beijing, where Chinese aspirational cosmopolitans are learning English as well as taking courses on how to pass European and American standardized exams for university entrance (figs. 5 and 6). Within this language market, many Anglophone African students—almost upon arrival—find themselves in illegal, hence exploitative, English-teaching positions to supplement their somewhat meager stipends. To buy the desirable iPhone, and to acquire the desirable Pleco app, a student will almost certainly teach English, given the absence of alternatives (a theme I explored in chapter 2). Even Francophone African students, like John, will quickly recognize this opportunity, committing themselves more diligently to studying English than Chinese.

Thus, it isn't purely the iPhone and its apps that anesthetize the panic of a bus-schedule comprised of only indecipherable hieroglyphs. It is also the necessarily imbricated ideological space-time of Anglo-cosmopolitanism—the Angloscene chronotope—within which John and Mingming imagine “safety” as long as they commit to that world. I asked John if he was ever worried about getting arrested for teaching English illegally. “Look,” he said, “as long as you speak English, no one is going to hurt you.” Here, it is more the belief than the reality of John's claim that is important. For many, English indeed appears to provide a literal, protective shielding from discrimination and persecution. But, again, this belief comes with significant compromise.

In *Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon explores a similar politicization of the sensorium in his discussion of *affectivity*: “In the colonial world,” he writes, “the colonized's *affectivity* is kept on edge like a running sore flinching from a caustic agent. And the psyche retracts, is obliterated, and finds an outlet through muscular spasms that have caused many an expert to classify the colonized as hysterical. This overexcited *affectivity*, spied on by the invisible guardians who constantly communicate with the core of the personality, takes an erotic delight in the muscular deflation of the crisis” (1963, 19).⁶



FIGURE 5. Yao Ming studying English.



FIGURE 6. Cowboy-themed ad for English and standardized test prep instruction.

In depicting how the colonial state governs the (re)production of violence through its governed and colonized bodies, Fanon uses this psycho-physical concept as a way of understanding an exploitable capacity for affective interpolation. Here, I hope to suggest that affectivity becomes a way of understanding how phenomena like governance (Xi 2014), hegemony (Gramsci 1975), and essentially the colonization of consciousness (Comaroff 1991) are all attained through managing affect by recruiting a capacity for its calibration—through forms of anesthesia or stimulation. For Fanon, affectivity is manifested through forms of repression—in the Freudian sense ([1920] 2015)—where the colonized subject is constantly dreaming of taking the place of the colonist. This “envy” persists through an ideological “compartmentalization” within, and subsequent to, the colonial order—from outright subjugation and constantly deferred dreams of racial inclusion. This situation creates perpetually “penned-in” colonial and postcolonial subjects who, accordingly, have what Fanon evocatively refers to as “muscular dreams, dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality” (1963, 15). For him, these dreams are not of “becoming a colonist, but of replacing him,” not only of escaping the colonized hell immediately, but desiring “a paradise within arm’s reach guarded by ferocious watchdogs” (16). On the surface, the colonized subject learns not to overstep the limits of this compartmentalization, yet at a deeper level, the colonized subject secretly harbors the dreams of a vital efficacy, engendering self-recognition as animalcules or monsters: “He patiently waits for the colonist to let his guard down and then jumps on him” (16). For Fanon, this figurative “patient waiting” is embodied in muscular tension, spasm, and so-called hysteria of the colonial bodies. In this way, colonial bodies keep on accumulating “aggressiveness,” while accumulating tension through a compelled stasis given the ideological and thus “physical” limits of the continually colonized condition.

This reinforced intensity in bodies—through a capacity or susceptibility—for further forceful actions on the part of the colonized, can be understood through Fanon’s evocative somatic metaphor as being “kept on edge like a running sore flinching from a caustic agent” (19). Here, affectivity is more than “being emotional,” since it imbricates a susceptibility to potential physical forces that transcend emotion as a rational reduction of complex affective states. Through his examples, he shows how—in needing to find “an outlet”—this affective capacity can be “drained of energy” through forms of crisis, the ecstasy of dance, spirit possession, fratricidal struggles, or intertribal conflicts (19). In its self-destructive manifestations, “the supercharged libido and the stifled aggressiveness spew out volcanically” (20). Thus, for Fanon, managing these “outlets” becomes key to maintaining the equilibrium of a social world: “On the way there [to the dance] their nerves ‘on edge.’ On the way back, the village returns to serenity, peace and stillness” (20).

In contemporary Sino-African encounters, affectivity perhaps no longer manifests through a barely suppressed rage. However, this manifestation—in

Fanon's context—is merely one symptom of affectivity as an exploitable capacity. Perhaps adaptation to transformed modalities of colonial capitalism, in the postcolonial era, necessitate a reconsideration of how affectivity must be (an)aesthetically apprehended, in and beyond the “third world.” Here, I suggest that a partial, (an)aesthetic management of this capacity might be at play in Chinese and African informants' persistent commitments to cosmopolitan desire despite encountering considerable obstacles within a landscape of exclusionary “global” cosmopolitan aspiration. I say that it is a *partial management* for two reasons. First, because affectivity—as an intersocial, beyond conscious capacity—thwarts the agential imperatives of rational freedom or capacity to choose, and second, because the (an)aesthetic conditions within which contemporary Chinese and African subjects find themselves to be emplaced complicate the outright manifestation of barely controllable rage in the ways that Fanon described decades ago. This speaks to the ways in which the world has perhaps not decolonized, but rather, that the sensory and semiotic conditions of subjecthood within that world have become compromised.

Thus, affectivity—as a sensory semiotic capacity—can be understood as a volatile nexus of intersocial forces that acts on subjects' not-necessarily-rational, not-necessarily-conscious propensities for reception and action, a space-time emerging between the volatile sensorium and the ideological materialities within which it becomes imbricated. Providing the example of dance, Fanon locates the capacity to calibrate affectivity as the political site of both resistance and control: “[T]he colonized's affectivity can be seen when it is drained of energy by the ecstasy of dance. . . . The dance circle is a permissive circle. It protects and empowers” (19–20). Affectivity is thus a capacity, exploitable either on the part of the colonizer, which renders the colonized more tractable, or on the part of the colonized—as a means of resistance through (an)aesthetic calibration similar to that proposed by Buck-Morss. Here, it is important, that this calibration dialectically draws on the ideological and material conditions at the experiencing subject's disposal—the articulation or anesthesia of histories of capitalist modernity and colonial stratification.

In Fanon's case, it is the dialectical space-time of the colonial encounter that supplies the ideological gravity or indexicality for grounding affectivity's exploitation, mirroring the ways in which the traumas of modernity require the cultivation of (an)aesthetic technologies (Buck-Morss 1992). It is in this way that the very means of emancipation for the postcolonial subject entails either an unlimited unfolding of endlessly limited compromises—perhaps fractally—or the violence of a discourse-ending *tabula rasa*. Perhaps there should be a reevaluation of the nexus between the sensorium and the semiotic in postcolonial studies' engagement with the analytic of translation. When the meaning of “language” is less overdetermined and the relationship between signs more dialectically considered, perhaps more attention can be given to the pragmatics of postcolonial translation as opposed to semantic fetishism over how to define it. The analyst might

then begin to begin to consider language *as* (an)aesthetic technology—where affectivity mediates English, as English mediates affectivity.

In the way that unmarked whiteness, as liberal ideology and horizon of aspiration, both necessitates and occludes the racial stratification of all other racial imaginaries, so too, I argue, the proposition of unmediated encounters necessitates the recruitment of new, silent subalterns. In many ways, this is critical race theory's most important critique of contemporary anthropology's failure to decolonize: That Euro-American anthropology's analytical focus from marginal humans to marginal nonhumans perpetuates the discipline's still-colonial impetus: its continued propensity to privilege speaking for, and representing, those who are unable to speak; its more recent propensity to resist translation as a disciplinary metaphor (in an act of spectacular representational denialism); and, finally, its escalating propensity to actively seek out nonmediation and nonhumans while nonetheless continuing to depict such topics and subjects only in terms of anthropology's own all-too-mediated and all-too-human relativistic proclivities. A translational attentiveness to the (an)aesthetics of mediation attempts a way out of the flat-footed impasse between so-called structural and non-/anti-representational anthropologies of nonhumans. It does so by understanding the sensorium as material, semiotic, as well as fundamentally ideological, and therefore as intersubjectively contingent. This is in fact not a new position, but it does require a translation of an older argument.

THE MEANS OF TRANSLATION

In stating famously that “the forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present,” the young Karl Marx once pointed to the centrality of the sensorium as a zone for mediating or alienating personhood, an understanding that has informed the ideological centrality of the sensorium for subsequent generations of Marxist scholars.

[Persons] appropriate [their] total essence in a total manner. . . . Each of their human relations to the world—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, being aware, sensing, wanting, acting, loving—in short, all the organs of [one's] individual being, like those organs which are directly social in their form, are in their objective orientation or in their orientation to the object, the appropriation of that object, the appropriation of the human world; the orientation to the object is the manifestation of the human world; it is human efficaciousness and human suffering, for suffering, apprehended humanly, is an enjoyment of self in man. ([1884] 2007, 87)

Since we are “affirmed in the objective world not only in the act of thinking, but with all [our] senses,” according to Marx, the capacity to appropriate the means for translating the senses is central to affirming species being (88). The sensorium—a far from depoliticized semiotic and material nexus that is vulnerable to

ideological and intersectional stratifications—is thus a grounding point for thinking and producing both human and nonhuman, as well as mediated and unmediated possibilities of personhood. In this regard, personhood does not require the narrow typification of an individuated “human.” Since, if we regard the sensorium as the means of production for fashioning more capacious personhoods, then the attempt to wrest control over the translational labor it already performs, is ultimately a claim to that means of production.